



GOP PICKS TWIN CITIES - A BIPARTISAN EFFORT: The goal on both sides of the river and the political fence was scoring one - or both - conventions.

Star Tribune: Newspaper of the Twin Cities (Minneapolis, MN) - September 28, 2006

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In the end, personal connections, a chance ride to the airport and rivals overcoming their differences helped land the 2008 Republican national convention in the Twin Cities.

On an October day last year, Tom Mason, who served as Gov. Tim Pawlenty's chief of staff, finished breakfast at St. Paul's Downtowner with Pawlenty and visiting Republican National Committee chairman Ken Mehlman and offered Mehlman a lift.

While he drove, Mason listened as Mehlman raved about Minnesota's beauty, its fall weather and its political value as a swing state and thought "Gee, we might have a shot at long last."

Mason's next call was to Jeff Larson, a low-profile but highly connected political operative with ties to the White House and the RNC.

A player in every Republican convention since 1984, Larson had been President Bush's regional political director in 2000 and had worked for Bush senior.

But with St. Paul and Minneapolis both led by Democratic mayors, Mason and Larson knew they'd never pull it off without help from the other side. Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak had reached the same conclusion after a breakfast meeting with Democratic National Committee Chairman Howard Dean in January.

An ardent supporter of Dean's fiery 2000 presidential bid, Rybak knew he had rapport with Dean and could sell the city, but he and St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman would need help from the state's two top Republicans: Pawlenty, and Sen. Norm Coleman.

Rybak called the senator and assured him that he would work hard for either convention and that the bid would go to whichever party chose first.

When national Republicans came to town, they were feted at the new Walker Art Center, were taken for a cruise on the Mississippi by media mogul Stan Hubbard, vice president of Hubbard Broadcasting, were taken on a tour through both cities and were courted by the two Democratic mayors.

When national Democrats came to town, it was Pawlenty and Sen. Coleman's turn. In April, the mayors submitted bids simultaneously for the Democratic and Republican conventions.

By summer, talk had turned serious on both sides. Minneapolis and St. Paul had survived several cuts and were among the final contenders.

Enter Tina Smith and Mason, two operatives who had last met in the emotional fray of Norm Coleman's race against Walter Mondale. Mondale was the replacement candidate brought in 13 days before the 2002 general election after Sen. Paul Wellstone died in a plane crash.

Smith, Mondale's campaign manager, had spent those 13 days locked in combat with Mason, who led the Coleman campaign.

In June, the two sat down over lunch at the Minneapolis Club, talked through their memories and put their differences aside, intent on winning one or even both, of the plums in the political universe - a national presidential convention.

"I came away from that meeting with great respect for Tom," Smith said. "We all knew we were going to have to work together to make this happen." Together with an array of DFLers and Republicans and Minneapolis and St. Paul city officials, Smith, Mason, Larson and others set about the task of proving that they could, among other things, raise the money needed for a convention.

Three weeks ago, Larson and Mason went to a "call-back" meeting at the RNC headquarters in Washington, D.C., and spent several hours talking through the details of hosting a national convention.

By Wednesday, the race had come down to the wire. National Democrats were to meet on Friday in New York to make their pick. National Republicans had already closed in on the Twin Cities.

Around noon, Sen. Coleman put in an urgent call to Rybak. Smith pulled Rybak out of an open house meeting with constituents to give him the news: The RNC had chosen Minneapolis/St. Paul.

At 1:15 p.m. Ryak called Dean. "He told me to please hold off," Rybak said. "I told him I could wait maybe an hour, but I reminded him we had promised it to whoever came in first."

By 2 p.m., Dean called back. "He said, 'We're not ready to make a decision,'-" Rybak said.

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Edition: METRO

Section: NEWS

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Index Terms: article ; campaign ; event ; st. paul

Record Number: 060928how0928

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